

Children's Services
222 Upper Street N1 1XR

Report of: Executive Member for Children, Young People and Families

Meeting of: Executive

Date: 22 June 2023

Ward(s): Finsbury

Subject: Proposal on the Future of Pooles Park Primary School

1. Synopsis

- 1.1. The objective of this paper is to support the recommendation to progress to the formal consultation to close Pooles Park Primary School.
- 1.2. Of all the schools in the Hornsey locality planning area, Pooles Park is the most acutely impacted by falling rolls.
- 1.3. When considering what action to take to reduce spare places we also consider other information about schools including their financial position, the quality of education and the local context.
- 1.4. Each surplus place is equivalent to a £5,700 loss of income and so this level of surplus creates financial pressure for the school.
- 1.5. Across the borough, 50% of schools across the borough are projecting deficit budgets by the end of 2024-25. This equates to an overall deficit of £5.5m
- 1.6. The responsibility for managing school budgets sits with Governing Bodies but without the plans and resources to achieve balanced budgets, ultimately, the deficit will fall to the Local Authority, creating an additional pressure to an already pressurised budget.
- 1.7. Ofsted inspected Pooles Park Primary school in November 2022 and judged the school as inadequate.
- 1.8. No Local Authority wants to propose school closure, but like other London boroughs, Islington is impacted significantly by falling rolls which is exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis and Brexit which have contributed to an unsustainable school estate.

1.9. The council has a sufficiency duty to plan for school places as set out in the Education Act, and in exercising this duty a responsibility to ensure children attend good financially sustainable schools. This means that the council is having to make some very difficult decisions.

1.10. It is within this context that this paper is presented for decision.

2. Background

2.1. The School Organisation Plan approved by Islington Council's Executive on 13 October 2022 sets out how we will manage the high levels of surplus capacity in our schools to ensure the best outcomes for children and sustainable schools.

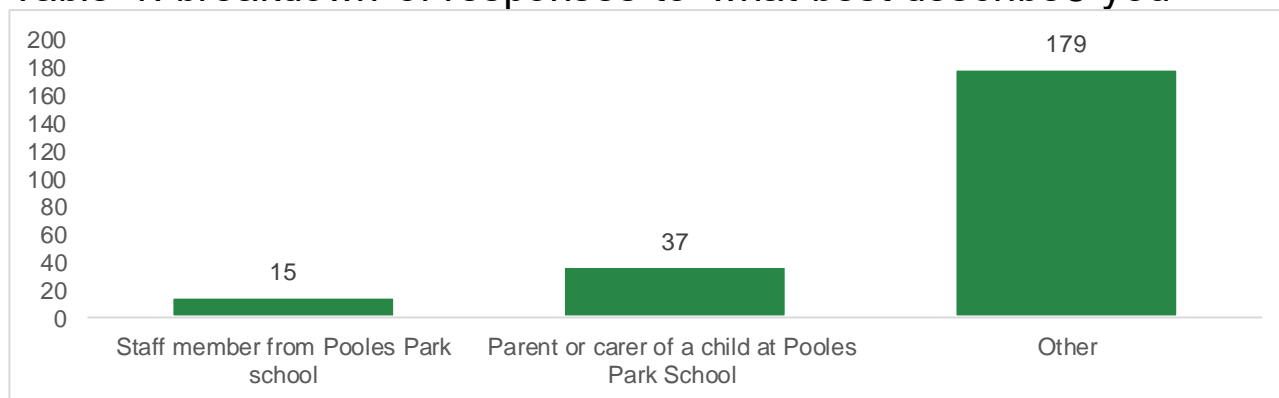
2.2. Based on this plan, the Executive agreed on 20 April 2023 to commence a first stage informal consultation to close Pooles Park Primary school due to the high vacancy rates at the school and in the school's planning area.

2.3. This report details the process of the first stage consultation and the responses received to this for consideration by the Council's Executive to determine whether to issue a statutory notice to close Pooles Park Primary School.

2.4. The first stage consultation ran for five weeks with a series of consultation meetings held for parents and carers and staff at the school and a community meeting at Islington Town Hall.

2.5. We received 231 responses to the proposal, of which 37 respondents identified themselves as parents, with 30 saying they have a child currently at the school. The breakdown of respondents is shown in table 1.

Table 1: breakdown of responses to 'what best describes you'



2.6. 83 people attended six consultation meetings.

2.7. The proposal and questions were translated to Arabic, Dari, Pashto, Somali, and Spanish.

2.8. Based on feedback during the consultation, we arranged for a specific meeting with interpreters for the largest groups with English as an Additional Language and extended the deadline for the consultation to Monday, 5 June.

2.9. As expected with any proposed school closure, respondents were overwhelmingly opposed to the proposal and most shared their positive personal and family experiences of the school and the important role the school plays in the local community.

- 2.10. The key theme emerging from the responses was the community garden with 65 respondents raising this: respondents expressed how much their children and the wider community had benefited from this asset in an area with little or no green or outdoor space and the daily educational benefits this brought to all pupils at the school.
- 2.11. Respondents also commented on the numbers of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and other children with vulnerabilities and the detrimental impact closing the school would have on these groups.
- 2.12. Although not directly related to this proposal, respondents were keen to share their disagreement with the recent Ofsted grading, which judged the school to be inadequate. Some are hopeful that the Department for Education will appoint an academy sponsor as it would avert closing the school.
- 2.13. Within the timeline of the consultation, we also received a petition with 133 signatories asking that a school remain on the site and that all staff remain part of that school. Most signatories of the petition stated they were parents, and we do not know if they also submitted a response to the proposal.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. To review and consider the responses to the consultation.
- 3.2. This report recommends that the Executive proceeds with the proposal to close Pooles Park Primary school to address the significant decline in pupil numbers if the Department for Education do not identify an academy sponsor, and on the basis that the Executive makes a series of commitments set out at 3.4 to address the significant concerns and issues raised during the consultation.
- 3.3. This would initiate the next stage of the prescribed process, which is to issue a statutory notice of the proposal, of which a draft is attached at Appendix D.
- 3.4. Based on the feedback received during the consultation, this report recommends that the council also makes the following commitments:
- 3.4.1. To offer individual support to pupils and their families with transition from the point a decision is taken through to the settling into a new school
 - 3.4.2. To work with local headteachers of nearby Islington schools to support the school and its families. There are places available for every child at Pooles Park in nearby Islington schools, all of which would provide this support should the proposal to close proceed.
 - 3.4.3. To work in partnership with a local group to develop the community garden into a Forest School provision that can be accessed by local Islington schools in the area as part of their curriculum offer during school time.
 - 3.4.4. To develop a clear plan for the ongoing use and management of the garden also as a community garden.
 - 3.4.5. To carefully consider the long-term future of the Pooles Park Primary School site and how it can be retained for educational and community purposes

4. Introduction

- 4.1. Birth rates in Islington have reduced significantly and this decline is projected to continue. This is leading to falling rolls and a high level of surplus capacity in Islington's primary schools with vacancies in reception at 20% in October 2022.
- 4.2. The School Organisation Plan sets out the approach as to how we will confidently manage this surplus capacity in our schools to ensure the best outcomes for our children and young people and sustainability of schools. The plan sets the strategic direction for pupil place planning across the borough and has been developed alongside the Education Plan to ensure that the principles applied to managing our school estate reflect our corporate and political commitment to driving educational excellence through inclusive and sustainable schools and supports the delivery of a quality educational experience for all children and young people through a diverse curriculum offer.
- 4.3. We have a duty to ensure that sufficient schools are available at primary and secondary stages of education in the local area, and for children with special educational needs. Decisions to change the organisation of Community and Voluntary aided schools are made by the council, and for academies, by the Secretary of State, advised by the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC).
- 4.4. Reducing the number of school places in a planned way will support schools to manage change within their national funding formula allocations. Department for Education (DfE) guidance on school closures includes a presumption not to close. Therefore, all options have been exhausted to avoid school closure although, where there is no alternative, long-term option, this does have to be considered.
- 4.5. The specific proposals of the first phase of the School Organisation Plan were to reduce the Published Admission Numbers of Highbury Quadrant, Pooles Park, Montem, and New North Academy primary schools and to amalgamate Copenhagen and Vittoria Primary schools.
- 4.6. We consulted on reducing the Published Admission Numbers (PAN) throughout November and December 2022 through our annual Admissions consultation and implemented a statutory proposal to amalgamate Copenhagen and Vittoria Primary schools.
- 4.7. A separate report to Executive on 20 April made a further recommendation to consult on the closure of Pooles Park school, due to the high number of vacancies at the school which threaten the school's long-term financial viability. Pooles Park Primary School rolls have fallen over the last five years and this is projected to continue. Pooles Park has the lowest number of pupils on roll of all the schools in its Planning Area.
- 4.8. Ofsted inspected Pooles Park Primary school in November 2022 and judged the school as inadequate. When Ofsted judges a school to be inadequate, the Department for Education (DfE) issues an Academy Order and invites applications from academy sponsors – known as Multi-Academy Trusts (MAT) – to take over the school. The DfE has issued an Academy Order for Pooles Park school. If an academy sponsor is identified the school will not close and the school building would be leased on a 125-year lease to the academy sponsor.
- 4.9. We ran an informal consultation on the proposal to close Pooles Park Primary School from 28 April to 5 June. This report provides the detail of the consultation and the responses to the consultation.

5. The Proposal

- 5.1. We are proposing to close Pooles Park Primary school on 31 December 2023.
- 5.2. School places are planned by dividing Islington into six different planning areas. Pooles Park Primary School is in Planning Area 2, Hornsey, which currently has one of the highest levels of surplus capacity in the borough with 23% in reception and 25% in Reception to Year 6, as shown in Table 2.
- 5.3. First preferences for admission in September 2023 are at their lowest level with first preferences at 62% of PAN, which compares to 71% for admission in September 2022. Pooles Park has the highest number of vacant places in the planning area.

Table 2: Planning Area 2 numbers on roll and vacancies in October 2022

School Name	NOR Reception	PAN Reception	% vacant places Reception	NOR Reception – Y6	PAN Reception – Y6	% vacant places R- Y6
Ashmount	59	60	2%	412	420	2%
Christ the King RC	34	45	24%	234	390	40%
Duncombe	44	60	27%	340	420	19%
Grafton	60	60	0%	398	420	5%
Montem	38	60	37%	262	420	38%
Pakeman	42	45	7%	286	315	9%
Pooles Park	20	45	56%	182	405	55%
St Marks CE	30	30	0%	195	210	7%
Whitehall Park	31	60	48%	267	420	36%
Total	358	465	23%	2,576	3,420	25%

- 5.4. Roll projections for the Hornsey Planning Area show a large reduction in pupil numbers year on year since 2016, which is not projected to change significantly, with a further reduction projected each year in the coming years.

- 5.5. The October Census for 2022 was even lower than had been projected in reception with a total number on roll (NOR) of 358 compared to a projected reception of 410, and we anticipate the updated 2023 projections will reflect this further decline in numbers.
- 5.6. There are several neighbouring Islington schools which have spare capacity as Table 1 shows and are within walking distance of Pooles Park so that an alternative school place at a good Islington school can be offered to every current Pooles Park child. It would be possible for groups of children and even whole year groups to move together due to the very high level of surplus places in the area.

6. The Consultation

6.1. The consultation process

- 6.1.1. We completed an informal consultation from 28 April to 5 June on the proposal to close Pooles Park Primary school in line with the statutory guidance on Opening and closing maintained schools. The consultation document is at Appendix A.
- 6.1.2. Officers supported several consultation meetings for parents, staff, and the wider community.
- 6.1.3. Based on feedback during the consultation, we arranged for a specific meeting with interpreters for the largest groups with English as an Additional Language and extended the deadline for the consultation to Monday, 5 June.
- 6.1.4. The proposal and questions were also translated to Arabic, Dari, Pashto, Somali, and Spanish as requested by the school community.
- 6.1.5. All documentation was shared with statutory consultees including parents, local schools, admission authorities, MPs, and other interested organisations. All the documentation was published online at a dedicated webpage. The consultation was reported on in the local press.
- 6.1.6. A set of questions and answers were published online at the start of the consultation.
- 6.1.7. 83 people attended the parent and community meetings where they asked questions and fed back their views and concerns.
- 6.1.8. 231 people completed the consultation questionnaire online. Respondents to the questionnaire were able to make additional comments. 139 respondents chose to leave additional comments.
- 6.1.9. We also invited respondents to send their comments to us by email to a dedicated mailbox. Three people emailed their comments, and a presentation was emailed setting out the benefits of the school and garden to the community

6.2. Main themes from the consultation

- 6.2.1. 231 respondents completed the online consultation questionnaire. We asked respondents to select an option that described who they were. 37 respondents (16% of the total respondents) said they were parents of children at Pooles Park Primary School. 15 respondents (6% of the total respondents) said they were staff members. Most respondents selected 'other'. 21% agreed or strongly agreed with the main

proposal, 77% disagreed or strongly disagreed and 2% neither agreed or disagreed or did not answer this question.

6.2.2. 83 people attended the consultation meetings. We received a petition with 133 signatories which also included comments on the proposal and requested assurances from the council should the school close

6.2.3. A summary of the responses to the consultation are provided at **Appendix B** to this report. The main themes that resulted from the consultation comments and meetings and our responses to them are set out as follows:

6.2.4. Ofsted judgement and academisation (20 comments)

6.2.4.1. Several respondents criticised the recent Ofsted judgement and opposed closure of the school based on that judgement. Some were supportive of the school being converted to an academy because of the inadequate judgement, whereas others were opposed. One respondent suggested we should wait until a decision on academisation was made by the Department for Education before consulting on closure.

6.2.4.2. **Response:** The outcome of the Ofsted inspection and the accompanying academy order because of the inadequate judgement are separate to this process. Our proposal is based primarily on declining pupil numbers, alongside which we also consider financial information and education outcomes. The Department for Education will decide whether Pooles Park is converted to an academy, and any decision to proceed with the proposal to close the school will not be concluded whilst the academy order is live.

6.2.5. Pupil numbers (25 comments)

6.2.5.1. Some respondents questioned the data about pupil numbers at Pooles Park and why another school in the local area was not selected for closure instead. At the community meeting, this was also raised including the benefits of the school not being on a busy road meaning pupils are less exposed to pollution.

6.2.5.2. **Response:** All data is based on the October census, which is the usual data point for decision making. We know that numbers fluctuate through the year, and even taking that into account, Pooles Park continues to have the highest number of vacancies in the planning area. Therefore, we are consulting on closing Pooles Park Primary school.

6.2.5.3. Respondents compared pupil numbers to other local schools and asked how these schools were able to operate with low numbers. Some respondents recognised that there were too many local school places and not enough pupils to fill them whilst others questioned why the school could not continue to operate with smaller class sizes, which is beneficial to children. One respondent was concerned about how the other schools in the area can cope with a large influx of new pupils from Pooles Park should it close and another suggested that Islington Council increase the amount of social housing..

6.2.5.4. **Response:** There are high levels of vacancies in local schools in the planning area, which is shown in table 1, evidencing how other schools could accommodate significant numbers of additional pupils. Schools are funded through a national funding formula based on the number of children in the

whole school. The statutory number of pupils is 30 pupils in a class and numbers below this across several year groups mean a school cannot remain financially viable. Closing a school is the very last option we want to consider but where numbers are so low in an area the funding means that closure must be considered to ensure a high quality of education can be provided.

6.2.6. SEND support (12 comments)

6.2.6.1. Some respondents commented on their positive experiences and outcomes for their children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Some suggested that the school be converted to a SEND specialist school.

6.2.6.2. **Response:** We will ensure there is full support for pupils and families for the transition to another school should this proposal go ahead. This would be through individual meetings with parents and carers; working closely with local headteachers in nearby schools who are committed to wrapping their support around the school and its families; and working with staff and families to identify what other support is needed. We are confident that the nearest local alternative Islington schools with spare places provide high quality provision and support for vulnerable pupils as evidenced by recent inspections and outcomes for pupils, with reports stating: “Leaders have high aspirations for all pupils. This includes for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). They identify pupils’ needs with speed and accuracy.” and “Leaders responsible for supporting pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are experienced and knowledgeable. They work closely with parents and external agencies to provide all the support that they can for pupils.” Converting the school to a SEND specialist school would not avert the fundamental lack of pupil numbers and challenging financial situation for the school.

6.2.7. Support for staff (17 comments)

6.2.7.1. Respondents spoke highly of the staff, both past and present, and the resilience they have empowered in children. Some were concerned about future employment opportunities for staff and hoped they would be retained in another Islington school.

6.2.7.2. **Response:** the school now has a partnership with Thornhill Primary School which is supporting staff in professional development. We will also offer HR support to staff, including CV and interview workshops and to support applications to other Islington schools should the proposal proceed.

6.2.8. The consultation process and support from Islington Council (7 comments)

6.2.8.1. A minority of respondents commented on the consultation process, including how staff and parents were informed of the consultation and the timeline for the consultation. Respondents also criticised the support Islington had provided to the Pooles Park leadership and how this lack of support had contributed to the Ofsted rating.

6.2.8.2. **Response:** We know that any announcement to inform of our intention to consult on closing the school was going to be difficult for parents, staff, and the local community. We are also bound by statutory guidance on the process for

closing schools and Islington Council governance procedures. We were keen to inform key stakeholders before the proposal was published and informed staff in the morning and parents and carers as the consultation opened at 12 noon on 28 April.

6.2.9. The school garden and wellbeing (65 comments)

- 6.2.9.1. Most respondents mentioned the community garden and how important this was to the school and local community. Respondents expressed that the garden was significant to many children who had no other access to outdoor space and was a vital educational and mental health resource. They emphasised that the garden was part of the school and should not be treated separately.
- 6.2.9.2. **Response:** we understand and acknowledge how important the garden is to the local community, and the significant benefits it brings to pupils individually and collectively. To ensure this vital community asset is not lost, we recommend that the proposal also includes a commitment to develop the school garden as a Forest School to provide outdoor education which facilitates the holistic development of a learner through play, risk taking and nature connection. This would be achieved through working with a partner organisation to manage this vital community asset and ensure it is well accessed by local schools. This development would also ensure the garden could continue to operate as a community garden to ensure its continued availability to the whole community.

6.2.10. The school site

- 6.2.10.1. Respondents to the petition support a school remaining on the site but if the school does close that the land is not sold to property developers and any homes built on the site are all social housing or affordable homes and parents of all children at the school are given first refusal on any homes built. Respondents also asked that Islington Council visit the development being built on the site of the Stationers' Company's School on Mayfield Road, N8.
- 6.2.10.2. **Response:** We will very carefully consider the future of the school site, if it does close, with the aim of retaining the site for educational purposes. We recognise the important environmental and community benefits of this school site and would want to ensure that it is retained for educational and community use.

7. The next steps

- 7.1. Based on the feedback received during the consultation we recommend that we proceed with the proposal to close Pooles Park Primary School with the additional commitments set out in the recommendations of this report.
- 7.2. If agreed, we will issue a formal statutory notice in accordance with the prescribed process. The draft statutory notice is shown at Appendix D. A four-week formal consultation period will follow once this notice is published.
- 7.3. The timeline recommended to proceed with the next stage is set out in the table:

Stage	Process and time required
Issue statutory notices	Following consideration of this report by Executive formal publication of notices stating council's intent to implement proposals
Formal Consultation	Four-week statutory representation period if the proposal is agreed to take place from 29 June 2023 to 27 July 2023.
Determination	Executive to consider public report of the response received during the representation period.
Implementation	December 2023

7.4. Impacts and risks

- 7.4.1. Islington has a statutory responsibility to manage and make appropriate offers of education, within a reasonable distance, to all children affected by changes at their schools.
- 7.4.2. We would need to do this in a way that safeguarded access to high quality education especially for vulnerable pupils and communities and those pupils with special educational needs. We will identify the needs of the existing cohort, especially for those pupils with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and identify appropriate mitigation to ensure that the right levels of support are in place and aid a smooth transition. An Equalities Impact Assessment (EIA) has been completed and is at Appendix C.

8. Implications

8.1. Financial Implications

- 8.1.1. It is becoming increasingly difficult for schools to remain financially viable when pupil numbers are falling as most school funding is pupil-based in line with the School's National funding Formula. Therefore, as pupil numbers decline, schools receive less funding. Per pupil funding in Islington is on average £5,700 depending on the characteristics of its pupils.
- 8.1.2. Individual school balances stood at £6.291m at the end of 2022-23, with 15 schools in deficit. School balances are forecast to reduce further over the course of this financial year, where more schools are projected be in deficit. School balances in Islington have been in decline since 2018-19 when they stood at £11.732m. The main driver of declining school balances is falling pupil numbers alongside increasing cost pressures such as energy costs and pay.
- 8.1.3. Schools that are in deficit or are set to go into deficit are required to complete deficit recovery plans to bring their budget back into balance and eliminate their deficit within three years. This is becoming increasingly challenging for schools in the light of falling pupil numbers and increasing cost pressures and is a national issue.

- 8.1.4. Pooles Park Primary School was in deficit at the end of 2022-23.
- 8.1.5. If a school closes the local authority meets the cost of any deficit balance from the General Fund. In the event of academisation, there are two scenarios: for converter academies (those that voluntarily convert) the deficit is repaid to the local authority by the DfE and recouped from the academy; for sponsored academies (forced conversion due to the school being assessed as inadequate – as would be the case for Pooles Park) the deficit remains with the local authority to be paid from the General Fund.

8.2. Legal Implications

- 8.2.1. Section 14 of the Education Act 1996 requires local authorities to provide sufficient schools for primary and secondary education in their area.
- 8.2.2. Pooles Park primary school is currently subject to an Academy Order. Should the Department of Education appoint an academy sponsor the school will be converted into an academy. The school cannot be closed whilst an Academy Order is in place, and the Department of Education would need to revoke this Order, on application from the Local Authority prior to closure.
- 8.2.3. The Education and Inspections Act 2006, the School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance of Schools) Regulations 2013, the statutory guidance 'Opening and closing maintained schools' (November 2019), sets out the procedure for closure of schools.
- 8.2.4. The first stage consultation and the proposals set out in this report comply with the above legislation and guidance.

8.3. Environmental Implications and contribution to achieving a net zero carbon Islington by 2030

- 8.3.1. Islington Council declared a climate emergency in June 2019, committing the council to work towards making Islington net zero carbon by 2030. A 10-year Net Zero Carbon Strategy, with action plans, was adopted by the Executive in November 2020. The implementation of the School Organisation Plan 2022-25 will be progressed in a manner that aligns with and supports the delivery of the council's ambitions for creating a clean and green Islington. Key environmental implications that the school organisation plan impact is:
 - 8.3.1.1. **Improving the energy efficiency and reducing the level of carbon emissions of all buildings and infrastructure:** schools form a crucial element of our non-residential buildings and infrastructure net zero carbon workstream given their number, size, and distribution across the borough. Decarbonisation Feasibility Studies have already been completed for 22 of our schools with a further 14 taking place during 2022-23. The impact on the environment and the findings from these decarbonisation reports will be fully considered in developing plans, and where there are falling rolls in making better use of the spare capacity thereby optimising energy efficiency.
 - 8.3.1.2. **Reducing emissions in the borough from transport:** Schools again can play their part in delivering on this priority. In proposing specific measures as part of school organisation planning, the implications on school journey

distances, school streets and potential changes to vehicle journey numbers will be fully considered in consultation with schools and key stake holders.

8.4. Equalities Impact Assessment

- 8.4.1. The council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation, and to advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations, between those who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it (section 149 Equality Act 2010). The council has a duty to have due regard to the need to remove or minimise disadvantages, take steps to meet needs, in particular steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities, and encourage people to participate in public life. The council must have due regard to the need to tackle prejudice and promote understanding.
- 8.4.2. An Equalities Impact Assessment was completed on 7 June. The full Equalities Impact Assessment is appended.

9. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

- 9.1. There was good engagement with the first stage consultation process, through formal responses to the consultation and attendance at meetings held during the consultation period.
- 9.2. The main themes emerging from the consultation were about the community garden, support for children with SEND, support for staff, and the implications of the recent Ofsted judgement.
- 9.3. 231 respondents completed the online consultation questionnaire and 77% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the proposal to close Pooles Park Primary School.
- 9.4. 83 people attended the consultation meetings. An additional theme raised at this meeting was a suggestion that another local school be closed instead, because Pooles Park was not on a busy road, so children were less exposed to pollution.
- 9.5. This report recommends that the Executive support the proposal because surplus capacity at the school means the school cannot remain financially viable. The Hornsey Planning Area has the second highest rate of vacancies in Islington and Pooles Park has the highest surplus capacity of all schools in the Planning Area.

10. Appendices

- Appendix A – Consultation document on the Proposal for the Future of Pooles Park Primary School
- Appendix B – Analysis of responses to the Public consultation
- Appendix C – Equalities Impact Assessment
- Appendix D – Proposed statutory notice

Final report clearance:

Signed by:

Cllr Michelline Safi Ngongo

Executive Member for Children, Young People, and Families

Date: 22 June 2023

Report Author: Sarah Callaghan, Director of Learning and Culture

Tel: 020 7527 5753

Email: sarah.callaghan@islington.gov.uk

Financial Implications Author: Tim Partington, Assistant Director of Finance, Schools, Resources and Childrens

Email: tim.partington@islington.gov.uk

Legal Implications Author: Rob Willis, Chief Corporate and Commercial Litigation Lawyer

Email: rob.willis@islington.gov.uk